

Hypocrisy from UMWA President Cecil Roberts after rebuke by Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama

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On Monday, Cecil Roberts, the long-time president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) union, released a video statement on the two-week-long strike by 1,100 coal miners at Warrior Met Coal in central Alabama.

Although the video lasts only three minutes and 19 seconds, and was shot from the comfort of his Washington, D.C., office, Roberts appears nervous and unsteady as he hypocritically declares his support for the miners and piles one lie on another. This is no doubt the result of the fact that only a few days earlier, the UMWA president was shouted down and run out of town by striking miners when he attempted to ram through a five-year pro-company contract. “It got hostile up there,” one miner told the *World Socialist Web Site*. The coal miners rejected the deal by a 1,006-45 vote and then videoed themselves burning the contracts and throwing them into a barrel.

Roberts conveniently omits these details as he begins, almost incoherently, at first. “Recently I called a strike at our operations in Alabama, at four local unions, at Warrior Met, and many people might look at this and say, ‘Why did you do that?’ Over the past five years, Warrior Met has been a terrible company for our people to work for. Working as long as 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in some of the most dangerous conditions in the mining industry in North America.”

After describing the unsafe conditions and the fact that many workers are forced to work on holidays, Roberts says, “So many people would look at this and say, ‘So, how did it end up that way, because UMWA contracts are generally much better than that?’ That is absolutely a fact, but we have something here that encompasses everything that’s wrong with the laws in America, starting with the bankruptcy laws. In 2016, Jim Walters Industries filed for bankruptcy, and this company Warrior Met was created by Wall Street investors, and this is how we ended up with a contract like we have.”

Several things need to be said. First of all, Roberts did not decide to call the strike on his own. If it were up to him, he never would have called a strike. Five years ago, the UMWA signed a contract that imposed a \$6-an-hour wage cut, and it is clear that the union was prepared to accept a contract that restored less than a quarter of the hourly pay cut over the period of five years—as the agreement reached by Roberts demonstrated. But the fact that company has pumped record production and profits out of

workers, handed all the productivity bonuses to supervisors, maintained its brutal absenteeism policy, and handed its top executives multimillion-dollar payouts led to such anger that the UMWA had no choice but to call a strike.

As one miner told the WSWs, “Underground, the supervisors show off the new homes they’ve bought with their bonuses. It’s humiliating. With all the harassment, we couldn’t wait to get on the picket lines. When you cuss them as they head into the mines—it is therapeutic.”

Unable to contain his hostility towards the militant action of miners, Roberts said in a press release announcing the walkout on April 1 that “nobody in their right mind wants to go on strike.” In fact, during his 25 years as union president, Roberts has not called a single significant strike. In the nearly three decades since the last walkout by Peabody miners in 1993, the UMWA has colluded with the coal bosses and their Wall Street investors in the restructuring of the industry and the decimation of miners’ jobs, wages, pensions and working conditions. UMWA, which once had half a million members, and still more than 100,000 in 1980, has fallen to 35,000 members, of which barely 20,000 are miners.

From 2010 to 2019, more than 50 US coal companies filed for bankruptcy, including Peabody, Alpha Natural Resources, Patriot Coal Company, Walter Energy, and James River Coal.

During every bankruptcy, Roberts and the UMWA leadership either passively allowed union contracts to be wiped off the books or actively aided the company. Such was the case with Patriot’s bankruptcy, where the UMWA agreed to allow the workers’ pension fund to be annihilated and replaced with a Voluntary Employees’ Benefits Association (VEBA) to which Patriot provided \$15 million in cash, a fraction of its current health care costs, now averaging nearly \$7 million a month. In return, the union was guaranteed a 35 percent stock holding in the restructured company—making Roberts & Co. active partners in the exploitation of coal miners.

In the video, Roberts makes the claim that “it was the union in 2016 that saved the pensions and the healthcare. But we still ended up with a contract forced upon us mainly because we lost our right to represent the workers there.” This is an outright lie. The UMWA’s bankruptcy experts worked with Walter Energy at every step of the bankruptcy process, ensuring that the financial and institutional interests of the UMWA bureaucracy were protected

even as workers' hard-won gains were gutted to put the company's "costs into line with the new realities of our industry," as Walter Energy-turned-Warrior boss Walter Scheller said.

At the time, Roberts publicly assured miners that the bankruptcy would not affect the terms and conditions of their employment. In reality, Roberts gave Walter Energy and its successor—Coal Acquisition LLC (now Warrior Met Coal)—massive concessions in the form of a \$6-an-hour wage cut, mass layoffs, and cuts to pensions and benefits.

Roberts's concerns over the methane gas and other deadly dangers at Warrior Met are no more sincere. The UMWA has directly collaborated with Warrior and its predecessor to eviscerate basic safety protocols. In 2001, a buildup of methane gas in Warrior Met's No. 5 mine (at the time under Walter Energy) triggered an explosion that killed 13 miners.

This was also the root cause of the 2010 mine disaster at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia, which tragically took the lives of 29 miners. In both cases, the warnings made by gas sensors put in place to measure methane levels were ignored by management in the interest of continuing coal production. And in both cases, these were disasters which occurred under the purview of the UMWA. During the time of the West Virginia disaster—the worst in 40 years—Joe Main, a former UMWA safety director, headed up Obama's Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), which was no less complicit.

In his statement, Roberts said he called the strike to "fix the problems" with Warrior, and "then the members voted, they could have had a contract that made improvements in their terribly bad working conditions, or they could choose to strike. And they overwhelmingly chose to strike," again leaving out that rank-and-file miners did that in defiance of the sweetheart contract the UMWA was prepared to accept.

Roberts then concludes: "We don't strike at the UMWA to lose. We strike at the UMWA to win."

Such a statement would be laughable if the outcome of the strikes betrayed by the UMWA and Roberts personally had not led to the devastation of miners, their families and communities, which have been transformed into centers of economic desperation and opioid addiction.

The coal miners of Appalachia, central Alabama and other regions were always the most militant and class-conscious sections of the American working class. In 1982, Richard Trumka and Cecil Roberts—both associated with the Miners for Democracy movement of former UMWA president Arnold Miller—took over the presidency and vice-presidency of UMWA, pledging "no more backward steps, no takeaway contracts" and to "organize the coal mines and bring stability to the union."

What Trumka and Roberts did, however, was abandon the UMWA's traditional policy of nationwide strikes to shut down all mines, union and non-union, until every union mine had a contract. The introduction of this "selective strike" policy led to the isolation of the AT Massey (1985–1986) and Pittston (1989–1990) strikes, even as miners faced levels of violence by the companies and the government not seen since the Mine Wars of the 1920s. The defeat of these strikes opened the floodgates for mass layoffs, the expansion of non-union mines, the spinning off of assets and

the setting up of dummy companies, and finally the wave of bankruptcy restructurings.

April 5 marked the 32nd anniversary of the Pittston strike. Roberts was the "on-site leader and strategist and chief negotiator" during the 10-month strike. During the strike, more than 50,000 miners launched a series of wildcat strikes to break the isolation of the Pittston miners. In September 1989, Roberts ended the occupation of a coal-cleaning facility before thousands of miners came to defend it against Virginia national guardsmen.

At the time, one miner told the *Bulletin*, a predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Cecil Roberts pulled the rug out from under us. He marched them out of the plant and told us to go home. The men were pissed off. We had finally done some damage and he tells us to put our tails between our legs and quit. Roberts made the excuse that if we stayed the union would be hit with a big fine. The real reason was the union leadership had an explosion on their hands. There were too many people and the UMWA leaders saved the company."

By January 1990, Trumka and Roberts shut down the strike and accepted a contract that granted the company all of its demands, such as round-the-clock seven-day production and ending contributions to the union-controlled 1950 benefit fund.

This is the real record of the UMWA. All the talk about holding "unity rallies" to mobilize "local and national allies," is only to soften miners up for another sellout agreement. Warrior miners must stop this by electing their own rank-and-file negotiating and strike committee to demand the full restoration of all concessions, the abolition of the brutal absentee system and workers' control over production. This rank-and-file committee should expand the strike reaching out and fighting for common action with the thousands of BCOA miners whose contract expires this December, along with striking ATI steelworkers, Massachusetts nurses, Columbia and New York University grad students, and the growing network of rank-and-file committees among educators in Alabama and other states, Amazon and autoworkers.



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